

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. *Modern Girls* focuses on a Jewish immigrant family during the Depression. Do you think that Rose and Dottie could as easily have been Irish or Italian or another immigrant ethnicity? Why or why not? If the story were set today, with a modern-day immigrant family, might the story be different?
2. Dottie's friends have different ideas on what marriage should be. What did marriage mean in 1935? How has the definition of marriage changed?
3. Traditions—keeping kosher, lighting *Shabbes* candles, having a *chuppah* at her wedding—are important to Dottie, and she can't imagine her life without them. What traditions would you have a hard time breaking? Do you believe in the values behind those traditions or do you maintain them simply because that's what your family has always done?
4. Both Rose and Dottie have definitive ideas about what makes them modern women. Do you identify with their conceptions of the modern? Does holding onto tradition and "Old World" ideas make them less modern in your eyes?
5. Rose thinks Willie is a fool for wanting to travel to Europe at such a dangerous time; Edith admires him for his commitment to journalism and politics. What do you think of his decision? If you were Dottie, would you have gone with him?
6. Eugene spent a year and a half of his life with his aunt, and Rose feels that Eugene is a stranger to her. With Dottie gone, how do you think Rose and Eugene will fare? What do you see for Eugene's future?
7. Many themes are touched on in this novel: motherhood, family, assimilation, immigration, the rights of women and workers. Which most resonated with you?
8. Rose changed her name and her age as she shed her past life to become an American. If you could start anew, what would you change?
9. How much does the place you live affect how you think of yourself? Are place and identity linked?
10. Dottie's future is uncertain when the story concludes. What do you think will come of her marriage? What will her future bring?

A CONVERSATION WITH
Jennifer S. Brown

What was the inspiration for Modern Girls?

As the self-appointed family historian, I've begged relatives to tell me stories every time we gather. In days of yore, I'd whip out an old-fashioned cassette player to record what they had to say; these days I merely pull out my iPhone's voice recorder. A number of years ago, my father casually said, "Your great-grandmother had an unwanted pregnancy." I was shocked that not only did she have one, but that it was common knowledge in the family. Unfortunately, by this point my grandmother (her daughter) had died, so I needed to fill in the details with my imagination. Why would a married woman in those days not want a child? What were the options open to women? What if she'd been unmarried? All those "what ifs" led to Dottie and Rose.

What kind of research did you do?

The first thing I did was return to those cassette tapes and try to understand how my family lived, how they behaved, what they believed. I wanted to get a sense of the time. Some details I shamelessly stole: the names Rose and Ben came from my own great-grandparents; another ancestor was trampled by a horse at a protest in Ukraine; many of my family members were Socialist. Yet the story itself is complete fiction.

The next step was to read about the time period, both nonfiction and fiction. Many wonderful books helped shaped the world I was creating: *World of our Fathers* by Irving Howe, *Bread Givers* by Anzia Yezierska, *A Bintel Brief: Sixty Years of Letters from the Lower East Side to the Jewish Daily Forward* by Isaac Metzke, *Call It Sleep* by Henry Roth, *The Rise of David Levinsky* by David Cahan, and *In My Mother's House* by Kim Chernin, among others.

Finally, a trip to New York helped me solidify my facts. At the New York Public Library, I accessed *New Leader*, a Socialist newspaper, to understand the issues of the day. I also looked at transportation maps from the 1930s to learn how Dottie would have gotten around. A visit to the Tenement Museum helped me picture what Yetta's apartment would have looked like when Rose first arrived in America.

While the Lower East Side of New York is familiar territory for many people, was Camp Eden a real place?

Socialist camps for Jewish adults were not uncommon in the 1930s, the most famous being Camp Tamiment in Pennsylvania. Camp Eden was another such camp, beginning in the late 1920s, although by the late 1940s, it was primarily a children's camp. I knew about Camp Eden because my grandparents met there, but I could find no information on it, so I made up details about what it was like based on family photos. I was thrilled when, reading the Socialist paper *New Leader*, I found articles about the camp, and much of what I had written was not too far off base (although some is complete fiction; that's what novelists do when we don't know something,

we make it up). Wonderful ads appeared touting the benefits of the camp and I loved the ones that read “Where the Spirit of Comraderie [sic] Prevails” and “Special rates for Party Members.”

Do you have a set writing routine?

My best writing days are the ones on which I’ve had a long morning run. I find a good run clears my mind and prepares me for the day. I can work just about anywhere, and I do. At home, I sit on the living room couch with the computer on my lap. I’m a regular at my local café when I need a change of scenery. My town’s library has a gorgeous reading room built in 1892, which makes me feel like I’m in another time period.

I’m fortunate that I don’t need silence to write. I’ve been known to write out ideas while sitting in a room full of noisy kids while waiting for my daughter’s dance class to end or on the sidelines of the soccer field. If I feel a need to tune out the noise, I have playlists of music popular in the time period I’m writing about to help give me a better feel for what my characters would be listening to.

What are you working on now?

More historical fiction! It’s a little early for too many details, but I’m knee-deep in research on Prohibition—in particular gangsters and speakeasies.